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SUBJECT: Jordanians, Israelis Bridge the Rift in Joint Scientific Survey

REFS: (A) Amman 05130
(B) Amman 01353
(C) 04 Amman 08793
(D) 04 AMMAN 01971

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¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Jordanian, Israeli, and U.S. university professors and students in early July participated in a joint scientific survey of the Dead Sea area environment along the Jordan-Israel border. This survey and its predecessor in January, 2005, are the first of their kind and essential parts of the Bridging the Rift (BTR) Center, a proposed life sciences research facility that would be located on a 150-acre site straddling the border between Israel and Jordan in the desert Arava region south of the Dead Sea. Although the BTR Center -- an idea conceived by Stanford and Cornell Universities with New York donors -- is not yet in its construction phase, joint scientific surveys have begun. The active engagement of the Israeli and Jordanian participants shows that the academic component is proceeding well. In the recent desert field survey, Embassy intern observed Israeli and Jordanian scientists and students sharing a passion for science as they sampled and catalogued specimens from the Dead Sea and surrounding environments shared by both neighbors. END SUMMARY.

BRIDGING THE RIFT THROUGH SCIENCE

¶12. (U) An initiative of the private New York-based Bridging the Rift Foundation, the BTR Center will bring together Israeli, Jordanian, and U.S. professors and students as colleagues in scientific study of issues that are common to both Israel and Jordan (Ref D). The science center itself will be located in a remote desert setting south of the Dead Sea, part of the northern extension of the Great Rift valley. The hope is that science, as a universal language, will help build bridges between Israelis and Jordanians, cementing relationships and expanding dialogue that began with the 1994 peace treaty.

¶13. (U) Since New York-based BTR founder and Israeli citizen Mati Kochavi approached scientists from Stanford and Cornell in 2001 to be U.S. academic partners, BTR has recruited a number of scientists from Jordanian and Israeli universities and established three executive boards in New York, Jordan, and Israel. Within the next year, BTR will begin sending professors and students to Cornell and Stanford, fully funded, to begin their studies or complete post-doctoral programs. As affiliates of BTR, they will return to do research at the Center once it is built. BTR will also involve students in bachelors, masters, and doctoral degree programs at local universities.

SCIENTIFIC FIELD WORK ACROSS THE DEAD SEA

¶14. (SBU) Eighteen BTR affiliates attended the two-day field survey on July 8-9, and invited Embassy intern to accompany them on the first day of the survey in Jordan. The second day of the survey took place in Israel. Some of the participants had attended the previous survey and others were newly involved in the project. Joining the group were two members of the BTR Jordan executive board and one from the BTR New York board. The group comprised four Jordanian professors and three Jordanian students, three Israeli professors and two Israeli students, and one Stanford University professor. A Jordanian security official acted as a Jordan-Israel liaison officer to handle security and border-crossing issues.

¶15. (SBU) The survey began early Friday morning in Amman, where the Jordanian participants left to pick up the remainder of the group at the Allenby Bridge. The group proceeded to the hot water springs of Ma'in, where it took samples at several different sites. Descending from mountainous Ma'in to the Dead Sea shore, the scientists then sampled the hot springs freshwater as it mixed with the highly saline Dead Sea water. After lunch, the group surveyed several different sites in search of Dead Sea water

that was neither polluted nor tainted by freshwater. Throughout the site visits, they collected specimens of the tamarisk plant, which will be a focus of study due to its ability to survive in salty conditions. The survey participants stayed overnight at a hotel on the Jordanian Dead Sea shore and continued into Israel the next day for similar testing and sampling of the Dead Sea region.

SCIENCE AS A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

¶16. (SBU) The survey was very much a joint effort among all of the participants. The Israelis and Jordanians worked side by side. For example, an Israeli student would take samples while the Jordanian student recorded the information. They communicated in English.

¶17. (SBU) Socially, the Israeli and Jordanian professors were very open with each other. They sat together on the bus, chatted during lunch, and discussed their projects. Some of them knew one another from the previous surveys and planning meetings and seemed quite comfortable together. One Jordanian professor who had attended the previous survey in January told Embassy intern that she was at first "unsure" about working with BTR but during the survey she realized that they "speak science and all understand." She viewed BTR as an opportunity to go beyond the conflict that has been present for so long. The other told Embassy intern that despite his extensive studies of the Dead Sea, BTR is the first time he has successfully worked with Jordanian colleagues. The previous - and only - two attempts at scientific correspondence between him and a Jordanian quickly came to an end. When discussing BTR, he said the joint surveys and successful interaction between the Jordanians and Israelis were proof that BTR is "surely" different than his past two experiences.

¶18. (SBU) Although the students worked together during sampling and surveying, they were more reserved socially. The Jordanian professors said that some of the Jordanian students were still "uncomfortable" with the thought of working with Israelis. Nevertheless, the students relaxed with each other as the day progressed. One of the Jordanian students is of Palestinian descent and often visits family in the West Bank. Prior to the BTR survey, her only interaction with Israelis was with the soldiers whom she encountered during her family visits. She told Embassy Intern that she views her work with BTR as an opportunity to know and work with Israelis who are not soldiers. For one Israeli student, the BTR survey was his first time visiting Jordan. He spoke very highly of the program and the prospects for peaceful dialogue between Israelis and Jordanians, stating the commonly used BTR phrase that "science is the universal language."

BENEFITS ENCOURAGE BTR SCHOLARS

¶19. (SBU) All participants, especially the Jordanians, felt strongly that BTR would present them with excellent academic opportunities. Many of the participants will be invited to enroll in graduate and post-doctoral programs at Stanford or Cornell University, and will receive degrees. In addition, participation in BTR scientific surveys allows both Israeli and Jordanian students to gain excellent field experience, an essential skill for a career in scientific research and academia. The Israeli professors and students were interested in BTR as an opportunity to expand their studies of the Dead Sea area, which are currently limited by national borders. BTR presents Jordanian professors with the opportunity to establish and build expertise in areas where they are not as advanced as their Israeli and U.S. colleagues. The U.S. professor told Embassy intern that in order for BTR to be successful, participants must build and maintain parity between science in Jordan and Israel. Because Israeli science is generally much more developed than is Jordanian, BTR must devote extra time and energy to the development of Jordanian science in order to reach parity with Israel. In other words, BTR will bring about major advancements in Jordan's scientific capacity and ability, he said. The primary example is bioinformatics, which is the use of techniques from applied mathematics, informatics, statistics, and computer science to solve biological problems. Bioinformatics is a field in which Israel and the U.S. are highly advanced but Jordan has very little experience. Two of the Jordanian professors were selected and recruited to be trained in bioinformatics, which would enhance their careers as the first bioinformatics experts in Jordan.

JORDANIAN POPULAR SUSPICION

¶110. (SBU) From talking to the professors, it was clear that the Israeli participants enjoy markedly greater popular support than the Jordanians. Although King Abdullah, like Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, fully supports BTR, most of the Jordanian professors prefer to keep their involvement a secret, as this kind of engagement with

Israelis has grown quite unpopular with many Jordanians since the beginning of the second intifada, especially with the professional associations, which have mounted name-and-shame campaigns against so-called "normalizers." (refs B, C, and D).

¶11. (SBU) The Jordanian professors find little support for their BTR work among university faculties. While the Yarmouk University president is very supportive, many of the participating Yarmouk professor's colleagues oppose her involvement. In a similar situation at the Jordan University for Science and Technology (JUST), the professor does not want many of her colleagues or students to know of her participation, for fear of their reaction. The Jordan University professors said their colleagues and supervisors will not "formally" support their involvement. In contrast, one of the Israeli professors stressed that he knows numerous Israeli professors who would be happy to be involved in BTR.

THE NEXT STEP

¶12. (SBU) After the survey, each group of specialists will take their samples back to their universities for study and analysis. The Stanford University professor will remain with two of the Jordanian professors to train them on certain methods of DNA isolation and Polymerase Chain Reaction - a molecular biological technique for amplifying DNA without using a living organism - in order to comprehensively analyze their samples. The scientists plan to come together to report and share their findings, formulating the next steps in their joint scientific research.

A GOOD SIGN OF SUCCESS

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite the fact that the construction of the BTR Center has not yet begun, this second scientific survey suggests that the academic component of BTR is advancing and that the project as a whole is making headway. While the academic component is still in its initial phase, the two scientific surveys held within seven months of each other, the follow-on conferences, and the growing number of participants are positive signs of success. Politics aside, the progress of BTR will have strongly positive scientific, educational, and environmental effects on Jordan and its participants. The fact that one of the necessary components of BTR is to dramatically increase Jordan's scientific capacity and advancement is a benefit in itself. The engagement of Jordanian and Israeli participants in the academic and scientific setting is an additional positive sign that they will be able to successfully work, study, research, and publish together. These are among the goals of the 1994 peace treaty. Nonetheless, BTR still faces many challenges. Legal and security complications are being addressed (Ref A) and look to be solved within the year. The popular Jordanian suspicion of this kind of engagement with Israel forces BTR to advance slowly and quietly. END COMMENT

HALE